

# HR

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Assistance  
Program

# FrontLineSupervisor

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<http://www.dop.wa.gov/eap>

■ I have an employee who is a loner, but also a superstar performer. Lately he seems more withdrawn, and has been abrupt and rude to co-workers. Some have complained, saying his behavior makes them feel uneasy. He recently told me he needed time off to deal with "nasty legal issues." Should I confront this employee about his behavior or will that only cause his irritability to escalate?

**It sounds like** your employee is going through a very stressful time.

He may be distracted by personal problems and not aware that he is responding in a way that makes co-workers feel uncomfortable. Supervisors are often concerned that confronting an employee who is under high levels of stress may intensify negative behavior. The opposite is usually true. Clearly, compassionately and fairly addressing negative behaviors--such as the abrupt and rude interactions with co-workers--as job performance issues, and offering helpful resources such as the EAP, are generally positive interventions. Sometimes employees do not correct negative behaviors and the behaviors escalate. Warning signs of escalating behaviors include confusion, blame, hostility, frustration and anger. If this occurs, document each incident and speak with your supervisor or HR representative. In addition, consulting with your EAP will provide helpful direction regarding potentially high-risk situations.

■ I sense a subtle resentment toward me by my employees regarding my role. I've heard statements that suggest I don't do enough work. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am not very visible, but I am shocked at how naïve some of my employees appear to be.

**Many supervisors are** the subject of behind-the-scenes conversations by

employees who have little awareness of their activities. As a result, employees may assume their supervisors do very little. Of course, usually the opposite is true. Management expert and author Robert J. Graham once remarked, "If they know nothing of what you are doing, they suspect that you are doing nothing." This observation points to your solution. Avoid the temptation to be just an overseer or absent and mysterious person to your employees. More importantly, spend some time with them. Sometimes giving them more information about your activities is not advisable, but relationship-building activity will reduce the degree to which you are viewed as kicking back while they do the heavy lifting. What drives employee suspicion that their supervisor makes little contribution is usually a lack of communication.

■ I meet with many employees and frequently correct performance. Unfortunately, I often find myself forgetting the content of many discussions so I can't be definite about

**You have heard the** expression, "If it isn't in writing, it doesn't exist." This

is a good philosophy for supervisors to follow and relates to the crucial art of taking contemporaneous—unstructured—notes while talking with your employee. No matter how good your memory or ability to recall past events in great detail, it's no match for the power of contemporaneous notes. Contemporaneous notes frequently win in contests where one person's word is pitted against another's. They can serve to prove

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**what I said, negotiated, or agreed to. How can I improve my memory?**

you right, despite their subjectivity at the time originally written, as to what actually happened or who said what. Develop the habit of routinely keeping notes on disputes, negotiations, actions, and performance matters regarding your employees. Although the importance of documentation is often discussed in supervisory skills courses, the routine use of contemporaneous notes is a related skill that supervisors must also come to appreciate.

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■ **I don't hesitate to immediately go to employees and discuss performance issues when I see them. I often experience a lot of resistance and anger, however. I think my approach needs improvement. What are some good tips on how to approach these discussions?**

**Sometimes the correction** of performance must be done quickly. It's important to expect employees to accept the correction and move on with their work. There are many techniques for giving feedback; however, it's almost an art. Doing it well can increase productivity, which is your goal. Assume that employees want feedback. Many studies show employees don't think they get enough. Supervisors who are feedback pros operate on the premise that most employees hired for their positions are fully capable of doing acceptable work, so feedback and correcting of performance become a partnership in communication—not a one-way attack. This mind-set includes investigating what employees think about their own performance, what guidance they are relying upon for what they are supposed to do, what changes you want, and your ability to explain specifically what you want the employee to do or produce. Also, never underestimate the power of positive feedback for a job well done.

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■ **Most of the employees I supervise are specialists in their field. Since EA professionals don't have the specific knowledge needed to do our jobs, can the EAP still be a valuable resource for me or them?**

**Although EA professionals** are not trained specifically in the technical skills many state agencies require, they still can help. EA professionals are workplace behavioral experts, and EAP help may include imparting “soft skills” that affect interpersonal relationships with management, co-workers and customers. Do you have employees who habitually struggle with keeping their cool? Do some employees not grasp how important it is to be successful rather than right? Would you like to see your employees demonstrate more empathy in the workplace by using active listening skills—the ability to show by one's behavior that the requests of a customer or co-worker are heard and understood? The skill needed to adapt to personality styles and communicate effectively is another area you may need to explore. Consider performance issues and talk to the EAP about the possibilities. Everyone can benefit.

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## NOTES